

OPINION

THE FIRST AMENDMENT

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

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OUR OPINION

A Difficult Year Results of documenting sexual assault cases in our community are anything but pretty

"In Angelina County, rarely does a week go by without a report of — or an arrest made for — some form of sex crime or family violence assault. And sometimes the same individuals are charged with both."

— Jess Huff,
Jan. 1, 2022, column

The Lufkin Daily News started 2022 with the intention of documenting sexual assault cases in Angelina County. We routinely placed a graphic tracking cases and days between arrests on the front page.

The numbers do not paint a pretty picture.

To hammer home the point Jess made in her column, there have been 58 cases of sexual assault this year, which averages to more than one a week.

A snapshot of prosecutions in 2022 by the district attorney's office shows that:

- 5.3%, or 45 of the 846 cases prosecuted by the DA's office, were related to sexual assault.

- 68%, or 31 of those 45 cases, resulted in guilty pleas or verdicts.

- 55%, or 25 of the 45 perpetrators, were sent to prison.

- 35%, or 16 of the 45 cases, were dismissed.

- The average prison sentence was 22.75 years. The longest was 45 years and the shortest was eight years.

But her reporting during the year also pointed out flaws within the criminal justice system and brought to light other disturbing facts:

- The longest period of time between arrests was only 33 days.

- The victims in 49 of the cases were minors.

- And, adding insult to injury, victims of sexual assault often foot the bill for their treatment. Texas' Crime Victims' Compensation Program has a maximum benefit of \$50,000 for victims, but this may be limited or unavailable depending on other resources.

The series also resulted in stories that offer victims of sexual assault a feeling of hopefulness.

- The Janelle Grum Family Crisis Center of East Texas tries to provide relief and support to abuse victims.

Advocates who work for the center are trained to provide counseling in various capacities. The center operates a safe house as well as a number of client services, including support groups. The center also advocates for those who believe they may be witnessing cases of abuse, helping them find the words to speak up and provide support to the victim. Victims may be men, women or children.

Harold's House provides a forensic interview of the alleged assaults, as well as a SANE exam from a qualified forensic nurse who is specialized in conducting evidentiary exams of sexual assaults.

While Harold's House is a child advocacy center, its sexual

assault services are not only for young victims. And no detail is overlooked in providing comfort for sex assault victims during a SANE exam.

Both organizations provide their services at no cost.

- A 19-year-old woman shared her story of resilience after years of abuse at the hands of her stepfather, who is now serving a 35-year prison sentence. She's not sure what she wants to do with her life but she knows she wants to move away from Texas.

Unfortunately, despite the many reports that have been made in Angelina County or are currently awaiting trial, many more are likely to have gone unreported. The Brennan Center in 2018, quoting a 2016 U.S. Justice Department analysis of violent crime, the most recent year available, said nearly 80% of rapes and sexual assaults go unreported.

The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network estimates an American is sexually assaulted every 68 seconds. Every nine minutes, that victim is a child. One in 6 American women have been the victim of attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. Meanwhile, only 25 out of every 1,000 perpetrators will end up in prison.

A few other disturbing statistics:

- 321,000 American women are sexually assaulted each year.

- The lifetime cost of rape per victim is \$122,461.

- The prevalence of false reporting is low, between 2% and 10%.

Making a troubling subject even more difficult to cope with, the majority of sexual assault perpetrators are someone the victim knows. That could be a current or former partner, a family member, a person in position of power or trust, a friend or an acquaintance.

Chances are someone in your life is a survivor of sexual harassment, assault or abuse, even if they have never shared their story with you.

As we have said before, stories about sexual abuse or assault appear far too often in the pages of this newspaper because they happen far too often in this community. Breaking the cycle of violence is up to all of us because turning a blind eye to the issue and hoping it goes away does not work. In reality, it makes all of us just as guilty as the offender.

To speak with someone who is trained to help, call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at (800) 656-HOPE (4673) or chat online at online.rainn.org.

For more information on the Family Crisis Center, call (936) 639-1681 or visit fccet.com. To contact Harold's House about its services, call (936) 639-1999 or visit haroldshouse.org.

We're not going to quit reporting on the problem, but the tracking graphic on our front page will go away after this weekend's issue. If it only were as easy to make the horrors of sexual assault go away.

Goodbye to 2022, welcome 2023

Goodbye old year. You were a decent year, I don't care what they say about you. Yeah, a lot of crummy stuff happened in 2022. But a lot of good stuff happened in 2022.



SEAN DIETRICH

For starters, scientists finally pinpointed the origins of the universe. Researchers theorized that a chain reaction of exploding supernovae, 14 million years ago, created a 1,000-light-year-wide bubble, at the epicenter of which lies our humble galaxy.

Many top scientists agreed that this galactical event could NOT have happened by randomized chance.

When skeptical scientists were asked whether this new galactical discovery proved or disproved the existence of, ahem, Intelligent Design, they remarked, "We, um, well, next question."

Also, this year marked the first year in history that women refereed the men's World Cup. Which is a big deal in soccer world. And even though, personally, I only follow sports involving either Richard Petty, Dale Murphy or Miller Lite, I am very proud of my fellow soccer-loving human.

Also, this year Victoria's Secret featured its first model with Down syndrome, Sofia Jirau, who writes:

"When I was little, I looked myself in the mirror and said, 'I'm going to be a model and a businesswoman.'"

Today, Sofia can be seen sporting a high-dollar bra "in my favorite color, pink," Jirau said. "Victoria's Secret, I love it."

Sofia's story was shared with me by my friend, Kandy, from Cleveland, Ohio, whose adult daughter has Down syndrome. Kandy writes:

"Before the '80s, the majority of people with Down syndrome were shoved into institutions, but today people with Down syndrome are kicking butt, contributing to their

communities, becoming famous. We aren't just talking about changing the world anymore, we are actually doing it."

Also this year, my truck hit 189,000 miles. I don't know how my Ford F-150 manages to keep running even though it is 20-odd years old, but it does.

This truck has been so abused and battered, and has traversed 39 different states. And yet the thing keeps going.

Yes, the interior smells like a giant dog's hindparts. Yes, the seats are missing vital pieces of upholstery foam. But the truck is still going strong, and that must count for something.

This is also the year that Freida, an 18-year-old from Kansas City, Missouri, had an experimental cancer surgery. The operation was done in California. The surgery worked. Today, she is cancer free.

This year Chelsea (69), of Detroit, Michigan, got married for the first time. She met a man over the internet, an environmental scientist named Bud. Bud has never been married, either.

They hit it off. They went to TGI Friday's. They kissed on the third date. They had a private wedding in Miami.

"I used to think my life was over," says Chelsea. "I guess God had other plans."

This year, a 12-year-old kid named Zion got adopted. Zion's caseworker emailed me early in January. Zion and I began emailing back and forth for several months.

Zion's father was murdered. His mother was a drug addict who left him lying on his back for the first 7 months of his life. Zion almost starved to death. But that was not the end.

Today, Zion has been adopted by two loving parents who are smitten with him. Zion is an honor student.

He told his mother yesterday: "God has always been my looker outter. He looks out for me, I have

always known this."

Also, 2022 was the year I discovered I don't have cancer. Earlier this year, doctors told me they thought I had a major problem. They sent me in for test after test. I was so scared that my personal life started to fall apart. I lost nearly 40 pounds just from stress.

During one particular test involving a large digital-imagery apparatus, I was instructed by a young college-age female medical tech to drop my trousers.

I did.

Whereupon the young tech said, "Um, you also have to drop your underpants."

"But," I pointed out, "then I'll be buck naked."

After which the college-age girl said — and this is true — "Don't be embarrassed, I've seen millions of things doing this job."

After weeks of waiting, the doctor called me with the test results, I was at an Atlanta Braves game, standing in line at a vending booth, ordering an Ovaltine.

The doctor said, "You don't have cancer, Sean. You're all clear."

I started to cry, in front of God and country. And I mean REALLY cry. Snot and tears and everything. And try as I may, I cannot unfeel the gratitude I felt that fateful evening. I kicked back a few celebratory Ovaltines that night.

So, as we stand on the cusp of a brand new frightening year, I'll be honest, I don't know what 2023 will bring. It might be good. It might be a bad year. It might be the hardest, most disastrous year of my life. Or maybe it will be the best.

But, truthfully, I don't care what 2023 holds. Because I know who holds 2023.

Sean Dietrich is a columnist, novelist, biscuit connoisseur, known for his commentary on life in the American South. His work has appeared in Southern Living, the Mobile Press Register, the Tallahassee Democrat, and various publications throughout the Southeast, and he has authored 10 books.

WEEK TWO OF NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION TO GET MORE EXERCISE... PROGRESS SO FAR.



TODAY IN HISTORY

The Associated Press Today is Saturday, Dec. 31, the 365th and final day of 2022.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 31, 2019, the health commission in the central Chinese city of Wuhan announced that experts were investigating an outbreak of respiratory illness and that most of the victims had visited a seafood market in the city; the statement said 27 people had become ill with a strain of viral pneumonia and that seven were in serious condition.

On this date: In 1879, Thomas Edison first publicly demonstrated his electric incandescent light by illuminating some 40 bulbs at his laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey.

In 1904, New York's Times Square saw its first New Year's Eve celebration, with an estimated 200,000 people in attendance.

In 1951, the Marshall Plan expired after distributing more than \$12 billion in foreign aid.

In 1972, Major League baseball player Roberto Clemente, 38, was killed when a plane he chartered and was traveling on to bring relief

supplies to earthquake-devastated Nicaragua crashed shortly after takeoff from Puerto Rico.

In 1974, private U.S. citizens were allowed to buy and own gold for the first time in more than 40 years.

In 1978, Taiwanese diplomats struck their colors for the final time from the embassy flagpole in Washington, D.C., marking the end of diplomatic relations with the United States.

In 1985, singer Rick Nelson, 45, and six other people were killed when fire broke out aboard a DC-3

that was taking the group to a New Year's Eve performance in Dallas.

In 1986, nearly 100 people were killed when fire broke out in the Dupont Plaza Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico. (Three hotel workers later pleaded guilty in connection with the blaze.)

In 1987, Robert Mugabe was sworn in as Zimbabwe's first executive president.

In 1995, the syndicated comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes," created by Bill Watterson, came to an end after a 10-year run.

HEADLINES in Local HISTORY

DECEMBER 31, 2022
JANUARY 1, 2023

Five years ago
■ Kurth Lake sees numerous renovations in 2017 to make it a more attractive spot for prospected fishermen.

Ten years ago
■ Lufkin Lady Pack comes back from Christmas holidays by sweeping four games to claim basketball championship title in the Livingston tournament. Top scorer for Lufkin is Kassie Jones with 73 total points.
■ Greg Sanchez takes oath of office as

Angelina County's newest sheriff.

Twenty years ago
■ Abitibi vice president Pierre Felix will head paper mill during search for a new general manager.
■ Newly elected and reelected county officials are sworn in, including new County Court-at-Law No. 1 Judge Lisa Burkhalter and County Court-at-Law No. 2 Judge Barry Bryan.

From the pages of The Lufkin Daily News, compiled by The History Center, TheHistoryCenterOnline.com.

Have your say

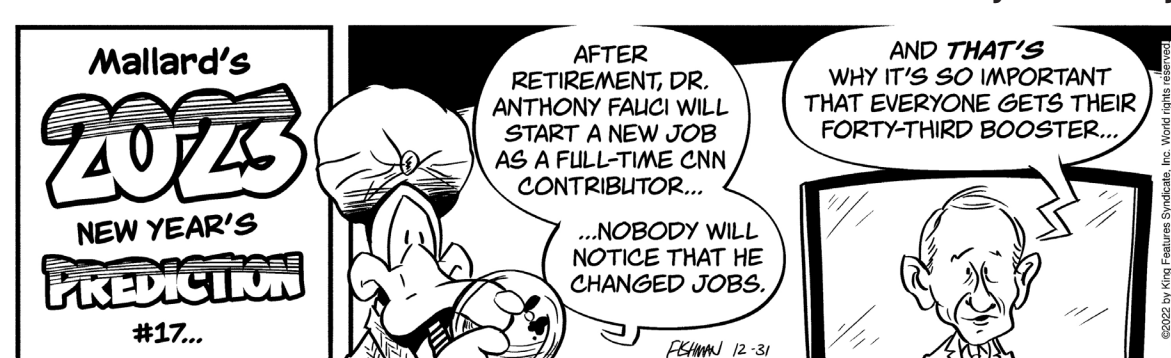
To submit a letter to the editor, bring it to us at 300 Ellis Ave. in downtown Lufkin, or mail it to P.O. Box 1089, Lufkin, TX 75902-1089. Or you can email your letter to news@lufkindailynews.com.

The Lufkin Daily News welcomes letters of up to 250 words. All letters are subject to editing for length and clarity, and unsigned letters will not be used. Un-

less you stipulate "print only" on your letter, we reserve the right to publish in print or online. An address and daytime phone number must be included so the author's identity can be verified.

Only one letter per writer will be published during any 30-day period. Letters about politics, political campaigns or candidates will not be published once early voting begins in a primary or general election.

MALLARD FILLMORE



By Bruce Tinsley